Angles of Incidence

Mirror, Film, and Architectural Plot Twists

A design for the Hong Kong Central Film Archive
Angles of Incidence: Mirror, Film, and Architectural Plot Twists

Celluloid and mirror work in much the same way. Both interact with light, and in so doing project dynamic three-dimensional space onto spatially inaccessable two-dimensional planes. In the case of film, this two-dimensional projection crystallizes moments, and those moments are presented to an audience in the form of narrative, each frame influencing the interpretation of the ones after it. This sequence, "montage," can effect an audience in radical ways, ultimately serving as a conveyor of meaning; meaning which can be intentionally broadcast to achieve cinematic misdirection and plot twist. The question arises, then, can this be accomplished this in architecture?

What is the Kuleshov Effect? Why Hong Kong?

The Kuleshov Effect is the phenomenon whereby the audience derives meaning from sequential shots beyond what is explicitly shown. This device also works even when the sequences is not chronologically or geographically sequential within the narrative, and it allows filmmakers to implicitly state or imply information. These assumptions the audience makes sometimes get them in trouble though, as the meaning derived can be intentionally misleading, subverting a predetermined assumption. Great filmmakers like Christopher Nolan, Alfred Hitchcock, Sergei Eisenstein, and Lev Kuleshov have used this idea to exercise control over the audience’s perception of their art. This project aims to give the architect the same level of control: the ability to craft moments through misdirection, disorientation, reorientation, and materials native to the context of Hong Kong. In this way, the architect becomes the screenwriter, the director, and the cinematographer. The project also allows mirrored glass to emerge from its invisible but ubiquitous state in the fabric of Hong Kong, alerting the public to the several uncurated narratives and sequential montages throughout the city they otherwise ignore. By using reflection to intentionally obscure the spaces that the project creates, the archive amplifies and unmasks those the city has already created at a multitude of scales. This result is not only an establishment of the relationship between architectural theory, film theory, urban experience, and reflection as a tool for the control of architectural Kuleshov Effect.
What is the mechanism for accomplishing sequential dis- and re-orientation? *(Please see the attached video as part of this slide)*

**MIRRORED GLASS**

**Process Filmmaking**
Film played an instrumental role in understanding the kinesthesia and drama of Hong Kong. Footage was shot over the course of nine days on site, and was one of the driving factors in identifying and exploring a phenomenon that was filmic, architectural, and derived from experience. Taking documentary footage shot onsite and editing it, along with music, to have a specific narrative shape eventually informed a narrative approach to the building as well. There was a cyclical relationship between the observation of filmic space, its translation to film narrative, and the concept of the building. As one changes, it forced the other media to adapt.

**Process Modelling**
The film explorations also informed physical models, which were themselves photographed and filmed. These included scaled versions of the building without context, which allowed for a focused massing approach to identify opportunities specific to the treatment of the existing building in isolation. The observations made during this phase were then checked against the same massing strategies within context. Here, the scale and complexity of relationships was able to determine elements of building orientation, facade design, height, and ways to leverage existing reflective buildings for reinforcement of the concept. Finally, small scale pieces of the design used reflection to investigate key elements of the building design as it might be experienced directly. This informed a more inward-looking analysis of cinematic space within both the existing building and the addition. The idea of using the same ideas at different scales actually called attention to the contrasting natures of those instances and their effect on the viewer in both film and reality, instead of them becoming homogenized.
MISE-EN-ABYME AS PRESERVATION

The biggest design challenge for this project was incorporating the Hong Kong Central Market, an abandoned modernist building that was on the site. Due to its status as a historical landmark, it’s use had to be considerate and meaningful. For this project, the choice was made to use the building as a large scale exercise in the subversion of expectation, and as a particularly noticeable example of mise-en-abyme – a film theory term which means frames within frames, or recursive instances. This phenomenon is very apparent in Hong Kong, where large-scale curtain walls show inaccessible second instances of buildings and cityscapes.

For this building, this concept was used both as a preservation technique and as a plot twist. One half of the building was demolished for the addition, but a large mirrored glass wall along the center axis of the building maintained the original symmetry. This not only called attention to both the original and new states of the building, but also creating instances of mise-en-abyme around the site. By making these moves, the film works as a spatial and temporal archive as well, furthering the relationship between film, building, and reflection. Additionally, the first three floors behind the mirror have been removed, subverting the spatial expectation set up by the reflection.
How is this used at the scale of a person?

DEPTH, SEQUENCE, THRESHOLD

While reflection certainly plays a role on the scale of the entire building, it is important that the audience [or viewer] experience it at the human scale. Through filming in Hong Kong, it became very apparent that reflection on the scale of the human being used the same mechanisms, but to radically different effect.

The most interesting of these effects was the presentation of non-geographically linear episodic as visually linear. This caused a moment of spatial orientation, a realization of sequential discrepancy, and a reorientation. In filmic terms, the mirrors present a montage, and orientation is derived via the Kuleshov Effect. When that orientation is up-ended and a new meaning is conveyed...

An architecture plot twist has been realized.
What is the result for the architect?

ARCHITECT AS DIRECTOR

As previously mentioned, great film theorists and filmmakers have long had the power of montage in their toolbox. Eisenstein, Hitchcock, Kuleshov, Nolan, among several others, have fully understood and leveraged sequential storytelling and presentation.

In architecture, there have been many similar analogies made about montage. Auguste Choisy, Eisenstein, and Corbusier have all expressed their interpretation of architecture as the present example of montage in the arts.

The question, then, is that if montage is known in both film and architecture, and the Kuleshov Effect enables plot twists in film, is there not an analog in architecture?

In short, yes.

Through experimentation on site and in the studio, exercises in filmmaking and spacemaking, and research on film and architectural theory, I believe it can be conclusively stated that reflection and its ubiquity in Hong Kong offer an opportunity to understand and realize the subversion or meaning conveyed through sequential spaces. The architect can finally access the aspects of montage Kuleshov described.